

Laura Anderson Barbata: *Singing Leaf*

September 9 — October 28, 2023
Floors 1 & 2

Press Release

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Marlborough New York is delighted to present *Singing Leaf*, the gallery's first solo exhibition of the Mexican transdisciplinary artist, Laura Anderson Barbata. Occupying two floors of the gallery, *Singing Leaf* highlights nearly three decades of the artist's rich and varied output across time and place. Works on view include photography, drawings, collages, textiles, video, installation, and sculpture, as well as mixed-media documentation from a selection of social projects initiated with numerous collaborators. The exhibition will open on September 9, 2023 with an opening reception from 6pm until 8pm.

Since the early-1990s, Laura Anderson Barbata has initiated art-centered projects in the United States, the Venezuelan Amazon, Trinidad and Tobago, Mexico, and Norway which emphasize reciprocity, shared knowledge, and decolonial thinking. Through anchoring objects, *Singing Leaf* gathers many traditions, voices, and communities that are empowered by the artist's expansive definitions of authorship and collaboration.

The story of this exhibition begins in 1992. That year, Anderson Barbata, already a practicing artist, traveled to the Venezuelan Amazon, where Indigenous Yanomami, Ye'Kuana, and Piaroa communities accepted her proposal to initiate various papermaking projects. One of such projects is featured in *Singing Leaf*; produced with the Yanomami using paper made from indigenous fibers and dyes, *Shapono* (conceived in 1992 and completed in 2001) tells the story of the community's first communal dwelling, called a shapono. It was among the first (if not the first) post-colonial accounts of Yanomami folklore made for and by the Yanomami and written in their native language. To this end, paper—particularly handmade paper—had been, and continues to be, central to Anderson Barbata's practice—both as a preferred medium and a vehicle for storytelling and empowerment.

The impact the collaborations in the Amazon had on Anderson Barbata, both as an artist and a person, would be profound. In the following decade, Anderson Barbata traveled extensively between the Amazon and her studios in New York and Mexico City, creating her work almost in tandem with that she had been making with the Yanomami, Ye'Kuana, and Piaroa communities. Informed and affected by her experiences, she created works in response. Featured in the exhibition is *Archive X* (1998, reinstalled 2023), a site-specific installation consisting of a bamboo structure stacked with bundles of paper handmade from the pages of translated copies of The New Testament in Spanish, Ye'Kuana, Yanomami, Ashuar, Maya, and Quechua. The sculpture, among others on view, offers a critique of the erasure of Indigenous languages and identities, as well as the destructive forces of colonization (particularly in what is referred to as "Latin America").

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Autorretrato, 1994/98
C-print, ed. of 3 + 2AP
40 × 30 in. / 101.6 × 76.2 cm

Not only would her work in and related to the Amazon inform future projects, they spurred the artist to produce a series of headless "self-portraits" (some of which incorporate bridge and canoe motifs) in which she radically reconsiders ideas of perception and self-awareness and -reflection. The artist recalled: "I understood who I was and what I was experiencing: that I cross a bridge, my life, without a head because what guides me is not my head nor my eyes, but my inner self, which has its own way of seeing and its own way of thinking. That way of seeing and thinking is going to ensure that I do not fall from the bridge, and I arrive to the other side without falling. I understood that to be able to see the world, I had to remove my head." Several of these "self-portraits," made between the 1990s and 2023, punctuate the exhibition.

Since 2001, Anderson Barbata has expanded her practice further into the social realm, initiating collaborations with stilt dancers, artists, and artisans from Mexico, New York, and the Caribbean. They have been staged at various museums, schools, and in other public spaces both as exhibitions and performance "Interventions," the latter of which endeavor to draw attention to social injustices in the United States and abroad. Exhibited here are 18 costumed characters from *Intervention: Indigo*, which was originally performed as a large-scale street intervention in 2015 in Brooklyn. The collaboration between Anderson Barbata, the Brooklyn Jumbies (a troupe led by Najja Codrington and Ali Sylvester whose practice is based in stilt-dancing traditions from Senegal and Trinidad), Chris Walker, and Jarana Beat united performance, dance, music, textile arts, protest, and procession, intending to offer a response to the murders of BIPOC persons in the United States—and beyond—at the hands of the police. Seeking to reclaim a color that might be associated with police uniforms—and thus violence—Anderson Barbata and her many collaborators use the indigo dye to remind participants and viewers of the color's actual associations with protection, wisdom, and royalty.

The exhibition culminates with a selection of works on paper and zines that respond to and reflect upon the artist's ongoing project, *The Repatriation of Julia Pastrana*. Begun in 2005 in collaboration with The University of Oslo, anthropologists, sociologists, Sami scholars, intellectuals, historians, artists, and ethicists, the project traces the 2013 removal and repatriation of the body of Julia Pastrana (1834-1860), a Mexican woman exhibited in life and after death as "The Ugliest Woman in the World," from a storage facility in Oslo's Schreiner Collection to her homeland of Sinaloa, Mexico. Unlike her other collaborations, the artist herself does not consider *The Repatriation of Julia Pastrana* a work of art. Rather, as the scholar and longtime friend of the artist, Edward J. Sullivan elaborates: "Laura performed a long-term social intervention that required a virtually herculean series of petitions, interviews, diplomatic inquiries, and interactions with governmental, university, and ecclesiastical authorities. Within the context of a multifaceted career, Laura's project represents a many years long involvement and meditation on innumerable philosophical themes." Instead, the works on view are what Sullivan continues to call: "additive projects—or parts of the creative impulse that drove [the artist] to embark on her decade-long quest. They document and commemorate the events, yet they are subordinate to the essential altruistic and deeply political implications of the action itself."

Laura Anderson Barbata: Singing Leaf will remain on view through October 28, 2023 at 545 West 25th Street. A fully illustrated catalogue with texts by Edward J. Sullivan and Madeline Murphy Turner will be available for purchase at the time of the exhibition. The gallery is deeply appreciative of both writers' contributions to this ambitious project, as well as their unwavering support and scholarship.



Intervention: Indigo, 2015/2020
mixed media installation (18 characters)
dimensions variable

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